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EMBASSY VILNIUS AND EMBASSY KYIV: FOR EMBASSY MINSK

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TAGS: ECON PHUM PREL PGOV BO RS GG
SUBJECT: BELARUS: ASSISTANT SECRETARY GORDON'S MEETINGS
WITH CHIEF OF STAFF MAKEY AND FOREIGN MINISTER MARTYNOV

Classified By: Assistant Secretary Philip H. Gordon. Reasons 1.4,
b and d.

¶11. (C) Summary: In a wide ranging discussion with Assistant Secretary Gordon on August 14, Belarus' Presidential Administration Chief (White House Chief of Staff equivalent) Vladimir Makey conveyed Belarus' interest in improving relations with the U.S. Makey did not offer any concrete proposals, but welcomed A/S Gordon's offer to discuss a roadmap of benchmarks to address our concerns about human rights and democracy that could lead to a phased rollback of sanctions against Belarus' leadership. A/S Gordon's meeting with Foreign Minister Martynov, recapped the discussion with Makey.
End summary.

Belarus Looking to Obama to Change Relations

¶12. (C) In his opening statement, Makey stressed Belarus' interest in improved bilateral relations. He stated his view that both the U.S. and Belarus recognize the need to move forward our relationship. For its part, Belarus was ready for dialogue at all levels and was eager to remove the barriers that exist in our relationship as soon as possible. Makey noted that he had a Russian version of President Obama's book "The Audacity of Hope." He said the GOB and Belarus had hope in better relations with a White House inhabited by a person who can change America and the world.

¶13. (C) Makey continued that he understood change was a two way street -- both Belarus and the U.S. need to take steps to improve bilateral relations. He stated that Belarus was ready to hold honest and open dialogue, but would take concrete actions as well. However, he stressed that not all processes and actions will proceed at the same speed. Belarus' national identity and psychology was formed during the Soviet Union; the Belarusian people could not go to bed in the Soviet Union and wake up in the fully democratic country "we wish it to be." Democratization is a lengthy process and should not be forced to proceed at an artificially faster pace. Makey urged dialogue in order to convey such context about the situation in Belarus.

¶14. (C) A/S Gordon explained the Obama Administration's principled approach toward dialogue even with countries with which we have disputes, and our interest in exploring better relations with Belarus. In our view Belarus had taken a number of limited, positive steps (on political prisoners, distribution of independent newspapers, non-recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia), and the

U.S. wants to build on these to continue moving forward. The priority remains the human rights and democracy situation in Belarus. However, the U.S. also wants to explore mutually beneficial cooperation in other areas, including the WTO, NATO, and nuclear security. A/S Gordon stated that the U.S. would also like to see the U.S. Embassy fully staffed up to facilitate new avenues of cooperation. A/S Gordon also suggested developing a roadmap of specific steps by both sides to improve relations.

More Positive Steps to Come, Slowly

15. (C) Makey showed appreciation for our acknowledgment of Belarus' positive steps and stressed there would be more to come -- "the process of the development of democracy is a permanent process." Dialogue with civil society is necessary and will happen. More newspapers will be registered and distributed through state networks. Makey emphasized that the GOB's past and forthcoming positive steps came from a "sincere desire" to open up Belarusian society. He also urged a calm approach to change, as Belarus has already taken "sweeping" steps during the past year that were unimaginable a year and a half ago. A/S Gordon urged the distribution of additional independent newspapers and the registration of additional NGOs, and noted the importance of ensuring that the next presidential elections meet international standards. He pointed to the case of youth activist Artyom Dubski and noted that it would be unfortunate if the issue of political prisoners were back on our agenda. Makey indicated the Dubski case would be addressed and the MFA would provide us the appropriate information.

16. (C) Makey also hinted at possible factions in the GOB affecting internal discussions on reform. While noting that there would be forward movement, Makey said there could be different views and different proponents and opponents on specific developments. Makey "did not want to indicate that there are different views within (the GOB), but there are views on how to develop society."

No Problems with NATO and Nuclear Security

17. (C) On NATO, Makey said he saw no specific problems regarding NATO and was ready for further cooperation -- taking into account Belarus' national interests and obligations to its allies, including Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

18. (C) Makey also saw no problems in our cooperation on nuclear security and said our joint work at the Sosny nuclear facility was absolutely transparent and in line with IAEA regulations. Regarding the transfer of spent fuel to Russia, Makey said Belarus and Russia should soon finalize the protocols for the transfer. On START follow-on discussions, Makey raised the guarantees of Belarus' independence and sovereignty in the 1994 Budapest memorandum and said Belarus wanted to see these guarantees in any new agreement. This was important for Belarus in light of its pursuit of an independent foreign policy. A/S Gordon stated that we remain committed to the Budapest guarantees, which would remain in force regardless of the outcome of START follow-on negotiations. A/S Gordon also noted the possibility of VCI A/S Rose Gottemoeller visiting Minsk to discuss nuclear security issues and noted the President's Nuclear Security Summit in March 2009.

Embassy Staffing: On the Table, but No Progress

19. (C) Makey reiterated the GOB's traditional linkage between restrictions on Embassy Minsk staffing and our financial sanctions on the Lukashenka-controlled company Belneftekhim -- once sanctions are lifted, the GOB will

remove staffing restrictions. (Comment: Lukashenka has personally and publicly given these marching orders on restrictions on our Embassy staffing and Makey is just following the party line.) A/S Gordon emphasized our position that our sanctions are based on our human rights and democracy concerns and only movement in these areas will lead to any movement on sanctions. Ultimately, Makey stated that everything was on the table in our dialogue and Embassy staffing could be discussed within the context of a roadmap to improve relations. He also noted increased trade and economic ties with the U.S. could help remove the staffing restrictions.

¶10. (C) A/S Gordon suggested short term measures to increase our bilateral engagement, including designating a non-resident defense attach, legal attach, and Foreign Commercial Service representative. Makey said he understood such issues had been raised and, while remaining non-committal, said he supported dialogue with U.S. representatives at different levels.

Sanctions are Driving Away American Business

¶11. (C) Makey commented that our sanctions are not against Belarus' leadership and in fact hurt the Belarusian people and American companies interested in doing business in Belarus. He noted the GOB wanted American business in Belarus to balance the influence of Russian business, which want to get everything for nothing.

Roadmap

¶12. (C) A/S Gordon outlined a roadmap approach to improved U.S.-Belarus relations, with suggested benchmarks to address our concerns about human rights and democracy that could lead to a phased rollback of sanctions against Belarus' leadership. Makey accepted the idea of a roadmap and agreed to further discussion of expectations, parameters, and a timeline. The key was concrete measures taken in a timely fashion -- "not referring to the U.S.," Makey noted making past arrangements, only to have Belarus' partners break them. Makey noted that he and Foreign Policy Advisor Rybakov have daily access to Lukashenka and this direct channel can help remove obstacles as they appear.

The Russia Angle

¶13. (C) In response to A/S Gordon's query, Makey closed the meeting with a candid portrayal of Belarus-Russia relations. Makey noted that while Belarus had in the past voiced its pursuit of a multi-vector foreign policy, in practice Belarus was almost completely dependent on Russia, especially for trade. Only after "problems" with Russia in 2007 (when Russia dictated higher energy prices to Belarus), did Belarus' multi-vector approach become reality. However, Russia continues to view Belarus as a vassal to which it dictates policy, including the sale of Belarusian state-owned enterprises to Russian oligarchs. Belarus' engagement with the EU on the Eastern Partnership Initiative was a particular problem with Russia.

¶14. (C) Makey believes Lukashenka's efforts to maintain Belarus' sovereignty have irked Russian leadership and he did not ruling out Russian involvement in Belarus' next presidential elections in 2010/2011. However, he believes this would be in vain as the Belarusian people will not be bought off by external forces.

¶15. (C) As has been noted to us and EU interlocutors in the past, Makey said Russia is putting economic pressure on Belarus to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

¶16. (C) A/S Gordon also met with FM Martynov and briefly recapped the same discussion he had with Makey.

¶17. (U) Assistant Secretary Gordon has cleared this cable.
CLINTON